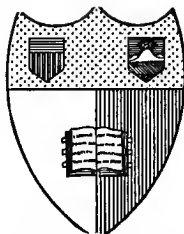


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# TWO MYSTIC POETS

K. M. LOUDON

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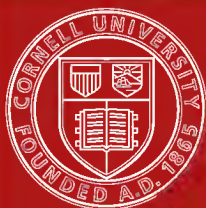
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## TWO MYSTIC POETS



# TWO MYSTIC POETS

AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY

K. M. LOUDON

*Author of*

"BROWNING'S SORDELLO: A COMMENTARY"

OXFORD: BASIL BLACKWELL  
MDCCCCXXII



A.525509

*Printed in Great Britain*

By FOX JONES & Co., Kemp Hall Press, High Street, Oxford.



## PREFACE

*THE three essays contained in this little book were written, long before the war, for a private Reading Club. I mention this to explain, and if possible to excuse, the "immoderate" quotation from well-known literary critics. I have, however, received the generous permission of authors, publishers and owners of copyright to make use of these same quotations, and I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness in full.*

*I beg to thank Messrs. Methuen and Co., the Publishers of "The English Poems of Richard Crashaw," and "The Poems of Henry Vaughan" (The Little Library) for their kindness in allowing me to quote freely from Mr. Edward Hutton's "Introductions and Notes" to the two Volumes above-mentioned.*

*My warm thanks are also due to Miss Alexander for the permission to quote four stanzas from the late Mrs. Alexander's version of "St. Partick's Breastplate."*

*I wish to thank Mr. Ernest Rhys and the Walter Scott Publishing Company for kindly permitting me to quote at great length from Mr. Rhys' Introduction to "The Noble History of King Arthur" (The Scott Library); and for many*

suggestions contained in his introduction to the *Second Volume* (" *Marvellous Adventures* ") of the same series ; and for both suggestions and quotations taken from his *Preface* to " *The History of King Arthur* " in the *Camelot Classics*.

It is perhaps unnecessary to state that the history of the Romance, as given in the *Essay*, has been taken from an *Encyclopaedia* (Chambers) —to the Publishers of which I beg to offer my sincere thanks.

I am further indebted to " *Chambers' Encyclopaedia* " for much information on Mystics and Mysticism.

I also wish to express my gratitude to the following Publishers who have most kindly allowed me to make long quotations (in " *East and West* ") from many poems of which they hold the copyright :—

Messrs. Macmillan and Co., Publishers of " *Gitanjali* " and " *A Crescent Moon* " (Sir Rabindranath Tagore) ; Messrs. Chatto and Windus, Publishers of " *Poems* " (R. L. Stevenson) ; Messrs. Longmans, Green and Co., Publishers of " *A Child's Garden of Verses* " (R. L. Stevenson) ; and Messrs. Charles Scribner and Sons, Publishers, New York, who hold the American copyright of Stevenson's *Poetical Works*.

K, M, L,

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TWO MYSTIC POETS  
CRASHAW AND VAUGHAN.



## TWO MYSTIC POETS: CRASHAW AND VAUGHAN

**B**EFORE we consider the work of these two men, it might be as well to give a brief account of their lives.

Richard Crashaw, the elder by some eight or nine years, was the son of a Puritan clergyman, and was born in London about 1613. He received his early education at the Charterhouse, and then went to Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, where he devoted himself chiefly to the study of languages and became proficient in five others besides his mother-tongue; namely Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian and Spanish. His leisure hours were devoted to music and drawing: "But"—says Mr. Edward Hutton, in his Introduction to *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw* in Methuen's *Little Library*—"it was Religion that always commanded his deepest love and allegiance; and it was said of him that 'like a primitive saint he offered more prayers in the night than others usually offer in the day'; and it is at last as the servant of Religion that we see him alone, always

“alone, a picturesque adventurer towards  
“Heaven in a stormy and hostile world.”

In 1634 he took his degree as Bachelor of Arts, and published a volume of Latin Poems entitled *Epigrammatum Sacrorum Liber*, which contained the famous line on the miracle at Cana of Galilee :—

“*Nympha pudica Deum vidit et erubuit—*”

(The modest water saw its God and blushed.)

In 1636 Crashaw went to Peterhouse, of which College he was elected Fellow in 1637 ; and the following year he took his M.A. degree. While at Peterhouse he thought of taking Orders, but in 1642, when the Chapel of Peterhouse was sacked by the Rebels, and the Parliament Commissioners insisted on all the Fellows taking the oath of allegiance to the League and Covenant, Crashaw with five others declined to do so, and was expelled. Shortly afterwards he joined the Church of Rome.

He then went to Paris, possibly because Cowley was there, and through Cowley's influence he was brought to the notice of Queen Henrietta Maria, who was also in Paris, in exile. She sent him to Cardinal Palotta in Rome, who made him his Secretary. Crashaw, however, did not get on with the Cardinal's household and for his own safety he was made Canon of



the Chapel of Our Lady of Loretto. He left Rome to take up his new duties, but on his way he was struck down by fever, and died shortly after his arrival at Loretto, in 1649.

The second edition of *Steps to the Temple* (Sacred Poems), with *The Delights of the Muses*, was published the year before his death.

Much less is known of Henry Vaughan. He was born in 1621 or 1622 at Newton-on-Usk in Breconshire, his father being a country gentleman and a magistrate. He was educated by the Rector of Llangattock, and then went to Jesus College, Oxford, but left the University without taking a degree. For a time he lived in London, but when the Civil War broke out "he was sent from home,"—to quote Anthony à Wood—"followed the pleasant paths of poetry and philology, became noted for his ingenuity, and published many specimens thereof."

His poems may be roughly divided into two groups—the Secular Poems, published under the title of *Olor Iscanus*, and the Religious Poems, published in two parts under the title of *Silex Scintillans*.

Mr. Edward Hutton, who edits Vaughan and Crashaw in the *Little Library* (Methuen), speaks of "Religious Poetry as Vaughan's true Mis-

tress," and it is with his Religious Poems that we have to do.

Vaughan appears to have practised as a physician in and about his birthplace till he died in 1695.

"What part he took in the Civil War"—I quote again from Mr. Hutton—"we do not know. Rumour suggests that he fought in some battles, and was imprisoned with a certain Doctor Powell; but all we know for certain is that his sympathy was with the Royal Cause."

Both Crashaw and Vaughan, mystic poets as they are, owe a great deal to the work of a poet who can scarcely be called a mystic, though he is very nearly one. It was reading *The Temple* that converted Vaughan. He writes in his preface to *Silex Scin'illans* of "the blessed man, Mr. George Herbert, whose holy life and verse gained many converts, of whom I am the least." Crashaw actually calls his volume of Sacred Poems *Steps to the Temple*, and sends a copy of verses with Herbert's *Temple* to a Gentlewoman.

*Know you, fair, on what you look ?*

*Divinest love lies in this book— . . . .*

*When your hands untie these strings*

*Think you've an angel by the wings. . . . .*

*These white wings of his he'll lend you,  
Which every day to Heaven will send you  
To take acquaintance of the sphere,  
And all the smooth-faced kindred there.*

George Herbert, Rector of Bemerton in Wiltshire, was born in 1593 and died in 1633. His Poems, collected in one volume under the title of *The Temple*, were not published till the year after his death. They were widely and eagerly read, 2000 copies being sold in a few years.

Mr. Hutton, in his Preface to Vaughan's Poems compares Crashaw, Vaughan and Herbert. He places Crashaw first, both as thinker and poet ; Vaughan second as thinker, and last as poet ; and Herbert second as poet, and last as thinker.

Personally I put Vaughan first—but I own that is simply a personal preference. We seldom get a whole long poem of Vaughan's really perfect all the way through: there are sure to be some unnecessarily rough and even careless lines ; but we do get sometimes a whole verse, often single lines, and constantly phrases, that thrill us with their beauty.

When one considers the work of these two poets, one immediately asks, " What is understood by Mysticism ? "

Chambers' *Encyclopaedia* gives a very good definition :— "Mysticism is not so much a definite system of thought as a tendency of religious feeling, cherished more or less at different periods in most religions by individuals or groups ; the essential element being the effort to attain to direct and immediate communion with God or the Divine."

A wave of mysticism was passing over Europe during the seventeenth century. Earlier in history there had been the Mediæval Mystics, Eckhart and Tauler, to say nothing of S. Catherine of Siena and our own Mother Julian of Norwich ; and a little later, Santa Teresa of Avila.

Now—that is, in the seventeenth century—we have Molinos (1640–1697) in Spain ; Pascal (1623–1662), Fenelon (1651–1715), and Madame Guyon (1648–1717) in France ; Boehme (1575–1624) in Germany ; and our two poets in England.

William Law, perhaps the most famous of English mystics, is rather later (1686–1761) ; and Blake (1757–1827) belongs to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

To Vaughan and Crashaw the one Reality in the world was God. There was no strict dividing line between this world and the next,

between time and eternity. It was all one. Everything was a manifestation of the Divine ; the supreme manifestation, of course, being Christ in His Incarnation. For them the Incarnation (including the subsequent events in Our Lord's Life, His Passion, Resurrection and Ascension) was the Central Fact in the Universe. And the reason for the manifestation—the redemption of mankind and the making possible that close union between God and man—rouses them to a personal devotion, such as, in an earlier age, the lover showed to his lady. They are, to some extent, the descendants of the old Minnesinger ; only with them it is the soul of man that longs for and that sings the praises of the Divine Lover. Their attitude is that of the Shulamite in the *Song of Songs* ; and we meet it in a modern poet, Francis Thompson. He certainly is at one with them in his conception of the Universe as an intimately connected whole, where there is, so to speak, no hard and fast line of division.

It will be remembered that when Francis Thompson's Poems first appeared the critics said, "This is Crashaw born again and born greater."

Read his last poem *In no Strange Land*, with its secondary title *The Kingdom of Heaven is*

*within you ; read the verses entitled Any Saint ; above all, read those lines in the last stanza of The Mistress of Vision.*

*When to the new eyes of thee  
All things by immortal power,  
Near or far,  
Hiddenly,  
To each other linkèd are,  
That thou canst not stir a flower  
Without troubling of a star.—*

and in them you will find the atmosphere of his predecessors—one might almost call them his spiritual ancestors.

We feel this same atmosphere in an ancient Gaelic rune, *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, some eleven hundred years old. The following translation is by Mrs. Alexander : I only give the first four stanzas of the poem :—

*I bind unto myself to-day  
The strong name of the Trinity,  
By invocation of the same,  
The Three in One and One in Three.*

*I bind this day to me for ever  
By power of faith Christ's Incarnation,  
His baptism in Jordan river,  
His death on Cross for my Salvation,*

*His bursting from the spicèd tomb  
His riding up the heavenly way,  
His coming at the day of doom,  
I bind unto myself to-day.*

*I bind unto myself to-day  
The virtues of the starlit heaven,  
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,  
The whiteness of the moon at even,  
The flashing of the lightning free,  
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,  
The stable earth, the deep, salt sea,  
Around the old, eternal rocks.*

*I bind unto myself to-day  
The power of God to hold and lead,  
His eye to watch, His might to stay,  
His ear to hearken to my need,  
The wisdom of my God to teach,  
His hand to guide, His shield to ward,  
The Word of God to give me speech,  
His heavenly host to be my guard.*

Everything great and strong and good in the Universe can be "bound" to the soul of man. "The virtues of the star-lit heaven," "the glorious sun's life-giving ray," and all that wonderful list, are part of the Three in One and One in Three, and man can make himself one

with them by making himself one with God, their Fountain and Source.

This is the feeling of the poem, and it is the same feeling that pervades the work of our two poets.

Was Milton a mystic? I think not. It is interesting to compare Crashaw's Hymn *In the Holy Nativity* with Milton's "Hymn" on the same subject. In Milton's poem

*The helmèd Cherubim  
And sworded Seraphim  
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displaid,  
Harping in loud and solemn quire  
With unexpressive notes to Heaven's new-born  
Heir.*

Crashaw sings,

*I saw the obsequious Seraphim  
Their rosy fleece of fire bestow,  
For well they now can spare their wing,  
Since Heaven itself lies here below.  
Well done, said I, but are you sure  
Your down so warm will pass for pure?*

Milton, of course, is the poet, but he is also the politician, the scholar and the theologian; Crashaw is the poet first, last and all the time,



and he is also the devout lover of the Divine Babe Who is yet so human.

It may be heresy, but I would give the whole of Milton's "Hymn"—except, perhaps, "The winds in wonder whist . . ."—for that fifth stanza in Crashaw's poem:—

*Proud world, said I, cease your contest  
And let the mighty Babe alone  
The phoenix builds the phoenix' nest,  
Love's architecture is his own.  
The Babe whose birth embraces this morn,  
Made His Own bed ere He was born.*

The poem on the Epiphany is not nearly so fine, but there are some beautiful lines, as, for example:—

*O little All, in Thy embrace  
The world lies warm, and likes his place.*

The fashion of the time ran to extraordinary conceits, far-fetched fancies, and startling paradoxes, which may be accounted as blemishes, but they have a distinct flavour of their own and are so characteristic of the age that one comes to have a certain liking for them. Take this verse from the Poem *Upon Easter Day*.

*Life, by this Light's nativity,  
All creatures have ;  
Death only by this Day's just doom is forced to die,  
Nor is Death forced ; for may he lie  
Throned in Thy grave,  
Death will on this condition be content to die.*

Another of these contrasted conceits is to be found at the head of the Poem on the Magdalene, known as *The Weeper*.

*Lo ! where a wounded heart with bleeding eyes  
conspire,  
Is she a flaming fountain or a weeping fire ?*

Mr. Hutton gives the first place among Crashaw's poems to the *Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa*. Crashaw seems to have cherished a romantic devotion to S. Teresa, and her books had a great influence on him. "To him" (says Mr. Hutton), "the Virgin Mary is a Princess whom he worships afar off, but S. Teresa is a great warrior saint, "an undaunted daughter.'"

He speaks of her in the few lines of prose which stand at the head of the poem, as "A woman for angelical height of speculation, "for masculine courage of performance more "than a woman ; who yet a child outran "maturity, and durst plot a martyrdom."

There are really three poems in the one poem : the *Hymn* proper, *An Apology for the Foregoing Hymn*, as having been writ when the Author was yet among the Protestants, and *The Flaming Heart*, which is a sort of postscript to the two other poems.

The *Hymn* begins finely :—

*Love, thou art absolute sole lord  
Of life and death.*

Unfortunately it is too long to quote, as is also the *Apology*. *The Flaming Heart* is longer than the *Apology*, but it is in the last lines of this poem that we have that lovely lyrical outburst which must be quoted.

*O thou undaunted daughter of desires !  
By all thy dower of lights and fires ;  
By all the eagle in thee, all the dove ;  
By all thy lives and deaths of love ;  
By thy large draughts of intellectual day,  
And by thy thirsts of love more large than they ;  
By all thy brim-filled bowls of fierce desire,  
By thy last morning's draught of liquid fire ;  
By the full kingdom of that final kiss  
That seized thy parting soul, and seal'd thee His ;  
By all the Heaven thou hast in Him,*

*(Fair Sister of the Seraphim !)*  
*By all of Him we have in thee ;*  
*Let me so read thy life, that I*  
*Unto all life of mine may die.*

We cannot leave Crashaw without mentioning his *Divine Epigrams*. He has a great many of them. May I give one or two examples ?

*Two went up into the Temple to pray.*

*Two went to pray ! O, rather say,*  
*One went to brag, th' other to pray ;*  
*One stands up close and treads on high,*  
*Where th' other dares not send his eye.*  
*One nearer to God's altar trod,*  
*The other to the altar's God."*

*And He answered nothing. Matt xxvii, 12.*

*O Mighty Nothing ! unto thee,*  
*Nothing, we owe all things that be ;*  
*God spake once when He all things made,*  
*He saved all when He Nothing said.*  
*The world was made of Nothing then ;*  
*'Tis made by Nothing now again.*

*Upon the Holy Sepulchre.*

*Here where our Lord once laid His Head,  
Now the grave lies buried.*

*To our Blessed Lord upon the choice of His  
Sepulchre.*

*How life and death in Thee  
Agree.*

*Thou hadst a virgin womb,  
And tomb.*

*A Joseph did betroth  
Them both.*

Crashaw's best known secular poem is the *Wishes* : To his (supposed) Mistress, beginning :

*Who e'er she be  
That not impossible She  
That shall command my heart and me.—*

and in the poem he shews a very pretty wit. But it is as a religious poet that he is best known, and his life all through is summed up in his *Motto* :

*Live, Jesus live, and let it be  
My life to die for love of Thee.*

Cowley, in a poem on Crashaw's death, speaks of him as " Poet and Saint."

*Poet and Saint ! to thee alone are given  
The two most sacred names of Earth and Heaven.  
The hard and rarest union that can be  
Next that of Godhead with humanitie.  
Long did the Muses banisht slaves abide  
And built vain pyramids to mortal pride ;  
Like Moses, thou (though spells and charms with-  
stand),  
Hast brought them nobly home back to their holy  
land.*

And now to consider the work of Henry Vaughan. Mr. Hutton says that he has now come into his kingdom because we care less for style and manner than did our ancestors. May it not be that we care more for thought ?

One of the best known of Vaughan's poems is *The Retreat*, which is said to have suggested to Wordsworth his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*. I trust it is not too hackneyed to quote in full.

*The Retreat.*

*Happy those early days when I  
Shined in my angel-infancy !  
Before I understood this place  
Appointed for my second race,*

*Or taught my soul to fancy aught  
But a white, celestial thought ;  
When yet I had not walked above  
A mile or two from my first Love,  
And looking back—at that short space—  
Could see a glimpse of His bright face ;  
When on some gilded cloud, or flow'r,  
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,  
And in those weaker glories spy  
Some shadows of eternity ;  
Before I taught my tongue to wound  
My conscience with a sinful sound,  
Or had the black art to dispense  
A several sin to every sense,  
But felt through all this fleshly dress  
Bright shoots of everlastingness.*

*O how I long to travel back,  
And tread again that ancient track !  
That I might once more reach that plain,  
Where first I left my glorious train ;  
From whence th' enlightened spirit sees  
That shady City of palm-trees.  
But ah ! my soul with too much stay  
Is drunk, and staggers in the way.  
Some men a forward motion love,  
But I by backward steps would move ;  
And when this dust falls to the urn,  
In that state I came, re'urn.*

In these few verses one meets with lines which linger in the memory and which one likes to "savour," as the French say.

Perhaps the most beautiful of all the poems is the one beginning,

"They are all gone into the world of light."  
In it we have some of Vaughan's best known verses, as for example :—

*Dear beauteous Death, the jewel of the just,  
Shining nowhere, but in the dark ;  
What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust,  
Could man outlook that mark !*

*He that hath found some fledged bird's nest may  
know  
At first sight, if the bird be flown ;  
But what fair well or grove he sings in now,  
That is to him unknown.*

*And yet, as angels in some brighter dreams  
Call to the soul when man doth sleep,  
So some strange thoughts transcend our wonted  
themes,  
And into glory peep.*

Here is another poem on the same subject.



*Joy of my life while left me here !*

*And still my Love !*

*How in thy absence thou dost steer*

*Me from above !*

*A life well led*

*This truth commends,*

*With quick or dead*

*It never ends.*

*Stars are of mighty use ; the night*

*Is dark, and long ;*

*The road foul ; and where one goes right,*

*Six may go wrong.*

*One twinkling ray,*

*Shot o'er some cloud*

*May clear much way,*

*And guide a crowd.*

*God's saints are shining lights : who stays*

*Here long must pass*

*Oe'r dark hills, swift streams, and steep ways*

*As smooth as glass.*

*But these all night,*

*Like candles, shed*

*Their beams, and light*

*Us unto bed.*

*They are, indeed, our pillar fires,  
Seen as we go ;  
They are that City's shining spires  
We travel to :  
A sword-like gleam  
Kept man, for sin,  
First out ; this beam  
Will guide him in.*

But most musical of all Vaughan's poems, I think, is *Peace*.

*My soul, there is a country  
Far beyond the stars,  
Where stands a wingèd sentry  
All skilful in the wars :  
There, above noise and danger,  
Sweet Peace sits crowned with smiles,  
And One born in a manger  
Commands the beauteous files.  
He is thy gracious Friend,  
And—O my soul awake !—  
Did in pure love descend,  
To die here for thy sake.  
If thou canst get but thither,  
There grows the flower of Peace,  
The Rose that cannot wither,  
Thy fortress, and thy ease.*

*Leave then thy foolish ranges ;  
 For none can thee secure,  
 But One, who never changes,  
 Thy God, thy life, thy cure.*

Sometimes in a poem, such as *The World*, Vaughan disappoints us. The poem does not fulfil the promise of its opening lines. On the other hand, where could we get such an immense conception as in these same opening lines ?

*I saw Eternity the other night,  
 Like a great ring of pure and endless light  
 All calm, as it was bright :  
 And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,  
 Like a vast shadow moved ; in which the world  
 And all her train was hurled . . . ."*

The last lines of the poem, however, are worthy of the first,

*This ring the Bridegroom did for none provide,  
 But for His Bride.*

In *The Incarnation and Passion* we have the beautiful lines,

*To put on clouds instead of light,  
 And clothe the morning star with dust. . . .*

*The Night* is another fine poem, full of suggestive phrases. The last verse is wonderful,

*There is in God—some say—  
A deep but dazzling darkness ; as men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that Night ! where I in Him  
Might live invisible and dim.*

It is interesting to compare with this idea of “a deep but dazzling darkness,” the Eastern proverb, “God is a Spirit, with Light for His garment, and Truth for His Soul.”

In *The Seed* growing secretly we have some more of these haunting lines.

*—For Thy eternal living wells  
None stained or withered shall come near :  
A fresh, immortal green there dwells,  
And spotless white is all the wear.*

*Dear, secret greenness, nurs'd below  
Tempests and winds, and winter-nights,  
Vexed not that but One sees thee grow :  
That One made all these lesser lights.*

*Then bless thy secret growth, nor catch  
At noise, but thrive unseen and dumb.  
Keep clean, bear fruit, earn life, and watch  
Till the white-wingèd reapers come ! ”*

In *Rules and Lessons* we see most clearly the influence of Herbert. The poem, which is a long one, might quite well have been a continuation of *The Church Porch*.

—*Walk with thy fellow-creatures : note the hush  
And whispers amongst them. There's not a spring  
Or leaf but hath his morning hymn. Each bush  
And oak doth know I AM. Canst thou not sing ?  
O leave thy cares and follies ! Go this way,  
And thou art sure to prosper all the day.*

*Mornings are mysteries ; the first world's youth,  
Man's resurrection, and the Future's bud  
Shroud in their births : The Crown of life, light,  
truth,  
Is styl'd their " star," the " stone," and " hidden  
food."  
Three blessings wait upon them, two of which  
Should move ; they make us holy, happy, rich.*

George Herbert, writing on Love, complains that men never sing of Divine Love, but only of human love. The poem begins,

*Immortal Love, author of this great frame,  
Sprung from that beautie which can never fade—*

and it ends thus :—

*Who sings Thy praise ? onely a skarf or glove  
Doth warm our hands, and make them write of love.*

Crashaw and Vaughan had probably read this poem. In any case they acted on the injunction which it contains. They both sang of the Divine Love, and of Divine Things ; and it was not with a “ Sunday ” voice, so to speak. They lived, and moved, and had their being in the world of spirit ; they really did understand the Practice of the Presence of God.

All three singers were much influenced by Marino, an Italian poet who flourished a little before their time (1569–1625). Marino and his school delighted in florid hyperbole and overstrained imagery, and we certainly find traces of this straining after effect, this piling of image upon image, in our own poets, but we also come upon quiet spaces, and we meet with most lovely and lovable phrases, with beautiful and musical lines.

People differ in their likes and dislikes. The Editor of a well-known Encyclopaedia of English

Literature nearly weeps with horror when he quotes Herbert's lines,

*God gave thy soul brave wings ; put not those  
feathers  
Into a bed to sleep out ill weathers.*

while George Macdonald says that it is the sign of a great poet to use "the homeliest imagery for the highest thought."

Herbert constantly does this. Take these two lines from *The Dawning*

*Christ left His grave-clothes, that we might when  
grief  
Draws tears, or bloud, not want a handkerchief.*

May I conclude by quoting another poem of Herbert's? I do so, because though it may seem inconsistent to say that it breathes the spirit of Crashaw and Vaughan—after having distinctly stated that Herbert was not a mystic—yet it is capable of a certain mystical interpretation, which seems to me to sum up the attitude of our two poets to God and to the Universe.

*Love.*

*Love bade me welcome ; yet my soul drew back  
Guilty of dust and sin.*

*But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lacked anything.*

*' A guest,' I answered, ' worthy to be here.'  
Love said, ' You shall be he.'*

*' I, the unkind, ungrateful ? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on Thee.'*

*Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
' Who made the eyes but I ?'*

*' Truth Lord ; but I have marr'd them : let my  
shame  
Go where it doth deserve.'*

*' And know you not,' says Love, ' who bore the  
blame ?'*

*' My dear, then I will serve.'*

*' You must sit down,' says Love, ' and taste my  
meat.'*

*So I did sit and eat.*

Here, in words which recall the reverent familiarity of Mother Julian of Norwich, we have set forth the Communion of the soul of man with



the Divine. It is the old figure of the feast, and the old mystery, met with in nearly all the religions of mankind, that God feeds the world—the great world of the Universe and the little world of Man—with His Own Life. And in this truth—with its corollary that, in spite of the sin of man, in spite of the infinite transcendence of God, owing to the tremendous Fact of the Incarnation, all is one in the Divine—in this, I think, we find both the inspiration and the message of our two Mystic Poets.



# KING ARTHUR

MALORY AND TENNYSON



## KING ARTHUR: MALORY AND TENNYSON

**I**T may seem rather late at this time of day to compare Tennyson's treatment of the Arthurian Legend with that of Sir Thomas Malory. The thing has been done already, but memories are short, and fortunately there are still people to whom any article—by whomsoever written—that treats of King Arthur, of Lancelot and of Guinevere, appeals as irresistibly as does honey to a bee.

Let us turn then to the Legend and consider again its origin and its history.

We are all, I trust, good Arthurians, and quite ready to do battle for our belief in the historic Arthur, the famous British Prince, King of the Siluri or Damnonii, who flourished in the sixth century, and who fought so gallantly against the Saxon invaders. Arthur stood as the champion of Britain and of Christianity against the heathen hordes from the Northern Sea. His stronghold was Camelot in Somersetshire. Leland calls it "sometime a famous town or castle upon a very torre or hill, wonderfully enstrengthened of Nature." Four ditches and as many walls surround a central space of about

thirty acres, where foundations and remains of walls may be seen, and whence Roman pavements, urns, coins and other relics have been found up to the present time.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the fort was known as the Castle of Camelek ; in 1727 it was called King Arthur's Palace, but a few years later the name was changed to Cadbury Castle. Still, it was the old Camelot where the Britons made their last stand against the Saxons. The Rector of S. Cadbury has shown clearly how its strategical position was connected in fact, as well as in romance, with the Isle of Avilon, the Monastery of Glastonbury and the Nunnery of Almesbury.

In 551 the Saxons took Sarum, and in 577 captured Bath ; but, except for the capture of Bath, during the next hundred years (dating from 551) they made no further progress in Somersetshire, as Camelot—which had become the capital of the South British kingdoms—stemmed the tide of war in this direction by its great line of strongholds. Here we have the historical circumstances that helped to connect the legends of the great British hero with Camelot.

Malory says in more than one place that Camelot is Winchester, but we must remember

that he is a writer of Romance, and that he alters geographical facts—and historical facts, too, for that matter—as he pleases.

The villages of Queen-Camel and West Camel exist to this day in Somerset, and the river Camel runs near, crossed by Arthur's Bridge.

So much then for the historical Arthur, but for the origin of the Arthurian Legends we have to go back far beyond the days of Arthur himself. Professor Rhys declares that many incidents in the Arthurian tales have their parallels in the stories which go to make up the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian Epic, and he says that for the germ of these stories we have to go back to the East—to the home of the Aryan race.

Our islands have twice been over-run by Celtic peoples. The Gaels, or Goidels, came first, bringing with them legends and stories which in course of time took definite shape, and crystallised, so to speak, in the person of Fionn. Centuries later came the Cymri, or Brittonic branch, also bringing with them their peculiar folk-lore. These legends, as in the first case, after having been allowed to float indefinitely in the mind of the race, took form and shape around the person of Arthur. Thus we have the Gaelic Heroic Mythic Cycle with Fionn and his companions as heroes, and Ossian as bard ; and

then the Cymric Heroic Cycle with Arthur and his Knights as heroes, and Merlin and Taliesin as bards. But we must remember that after the Legend first took shape it grew enormously, and that the first form of it bears the same resemblance to the later forms as does the tiny chick, just out of its shell, to the full-fledged peacock in all his glory.

We first meet with King Arthur in the lays of the Welsh Bards, supposed to be of the sixth and seventh centuries, though none of the MSS. are older than the tenth century. Here the deeds of King Arthur and his Knights are recounted—as one critic says—“modestly.” In the *History of the Britons* by Nennius (supposed to be as old as the seventh century but most probably no earlier than the tenth) the tales are more marvellous. But it is not till the twelfth century that the Welsh *Mabinogion* and romances about King Arthur, which had long hovered formlessly in the air as folk-lore, crystallised and took a definite literary shape.

In 1145 Geoffrey of Monmouth, afterwards Bishop of St. Asaph, wrote a History of the Britons, which he professed to have translated from a very ancient British Chronicle, called “*Brut-y-Brenhinell*,” found in Brittanny (or little Britain) and communicated to him by a



certain Walter Calenius. In reality Geoffrey's History was nothing but a masterpiece of imagination working on materials found in the Chronicles of Gildas and Nennius and still older legends. It was abridged in 1150 by Alfred of Beverley, and in the shortened form translated into Norman-French by Geoffrey Gaimer about 1154.

*Alfred* Thus in 1145 Geoffrey of Monmouth  
*Nutt.* first made the legendary history of Britain accessible to the lettered class of England and the Continent. Within nine years his first translator gave him to a wider circle of readers ; and twenty years later the British heroes were household names throughout Europe, and by the close of the century nearly every Literature had assimilated and reproduced the History of Arthur and his Knights.

*Encyclo-* Geoffrey's work apparently gave  
*paedia.* birth to a multitude of fictions which came to be considered as quasi-historical traditions. From these, exaggerated by each succeeding age, and recast by each narrator, sprang the famous metrical romances of the 12th and 13th centuries (first in French and then in English) from which our modern notions of Arthur are derived.

Thus, from Geoffrey's history, either directly

from the Latin original, or indirectly through the Norman-French translation, the Trouvères of Northern France drew their inspiration, and by them—in those wonderful metrical romances—the Story of King Arthur and his Knights was sung from one end of Europe to the other. From France the legend spread northwards into Flanders and Germany, and even Iceland ; and southwards through Provence into Spain and Italy. Told and retold, translated and retranslated, changed now by the individual story-teller, now by the Spirit of the Age in which it was clothed, now to suit the genius of the language or the tradition of the people to whom it was sung, the details of the legend, naturally enough, varied a good deal ; but the main points of the tale remained much the same throughout, and for the English-speaking races Malory's work has practically given to the legend its final form.

Tennyson's treatment of it differs, of course, from that of Malory. He brings some incidents in to greater prominence and almost ignores others of equal importance. He blackens one character which before was merely neutral-tinted, or even fair, and makes another, which was not quite faultless, absolutely so. But, on the whole, though the treatment of the facts may differ, the facts themselves are the same. Malory

finished his work "taken from the French," in the ninth year of King Edward IV. (that is about 1469) and some sixteen years later, in 1485, the book was printed by Caxton at the earnest desire of "some noble gentlemen of the realm of England."

To quote his own words, "I have . . . . emprised to imprint a book of the noble Histories of King Arthur, and of certain of his Knights after a copy unto me delivered, which copy Sir Thomas Malory did take out of certain books of French, and reduced it into English."

Between Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory stand those French Trouvères, chief among whom are Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Borron. But it is pleasing to one's feelings of patriotism to learn that it is to another Englishman that we owe some of the most beautiful tales in the Romance.

Walter Map, Archdeacon of Oxford, who was born in 1137, and who lived into the first decade at least of the 13th century, was the creator of Galahad, the stainless Knight, the son of Lancelot. He most probably wrote the Latin original of Robert de Borron's introductory romance of the *Saint Graal*, and certainly *Lancelot of the Lake*, *The Quest of the Saint Graal*, and the *Mort Artus*. He is generally regarded as being the

heart and soul of that contemporary work of Christian spiritualisation which systematised and gave meaning to the detached Arthurian Romances.

Let us hope that old Geoffrey (whom one of his fellow-priests accuses of "lying saucily and shamelessly") and all the many singers and writers who were inspired by him are permitted to know the pleasure they have given and the good they have done to the world. The influence they have exerted on their fellow-men and the debt that we owe to them are both alike immense.

Mr. Ernest Rhys, in his Introduction to *The Noble History of King Arthur*<sup>1</sup>, brings out this point so well that I quote the passage at length :

" Since Caxton first issued the *Morte d' Arthur* we know how the book has enthralled poets and men. Milton, we know, hesitated for long whether he should not make it his life work instead of *Paradise Lost*. Its spirit lives in Spenser's *Faëry Queen*. The eighteenth century felt its fascination, in spite of Malory's ultra-romanticism, and even attempted to adopt him. As for the nineteenth century, it is remarkable how Arthurian romance has affected modern

<sup>1</sup> *The Noble and Joyous History of King Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory. Edited by Ernest Rhys. The Scott Library.

art of all kinds, not only in England but elsewhere. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* naturally occur first to us, and in these poems, nobly designed in themselves, we may find it suggestive that what Milton intended to make into our English Epic should lose what epic potentiality it possesses in the daintier art of idyllic poetry.

"Poets of other schools have drawn largely, too, upon these Arthurian romances; they appear in the poems of Matthew Arnold, William Morris, Swinburne and others. English painting too, owes much to them, as the work of Rossetti, Watts, Burne-Jones, the late William Bell-Scott and others bear witness. In lyric drama, again, there is Wagner. *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal* form certainly the most intensive commentary on the spiritually drawn chivalry of the Holy Grail and the Knights who followed its quest that has appeared since Malory.

"This various reflection in modern art may perhaps serve to show in these times of realism, healthy and morbid, how the artistic spirit will still repair to the ideal, trying, as it were, to solve the problems of the nineteenth century life by a reference to mediaeval romance. It clearly shows again, if nothing else, the extraordinary vitality of the book.

“ The book is a romance, and not at all a history as Geoffrey of Monmouth and others would have us believe. Later historians have doubted altogether the history of King Arthur ; but such a doubt to your true reader will always be blasphemous. There may be a want of direct evidence concerning him ; but if any distrust the history, let them take the book and go to Queen-Camel in Somersetshire, where the legends of the ancient Camelot still remain ; or to Carlisle, or Caerleon-upon-Usk ; or to Bamberough—supposed to be Lancelot’s famous Castle of Joyous Gard ; or, best of all, perhaps, to the haunted land of Merlin in South Wales. There, in the spirit of old romance, let them go to Merlin’s Hill, where the great Master of Magicians is supposed to lie buried, and then striking off from the green pastoral Vale of Towy, climb the steep to Cerrig Cervnen Castle, within whose lonely walls that were a hopeless sceptic who dared to doubt that King Arthur, or some of his Knights, had once haunted there. Cerrig Cervnen, with many other spots in Wales where the sentiment of a romantic past still lingers, is perhaps a better commentary than any the Libraries can offer on the *Morte d’Arthur*. ”

Arthur’s country is generally considered to be Wales, for he often held his court at Caerleon-

upon-Usk : also Somerset, as we have seen from the history of Camelot. In Somerset, moreover, is Glastonbury where Guinevere is buried, and possibly Arthur himself. Nor must we forget his connection with London where he was crowned and where Guinevere was afterwards besieged by the traitor Mordred.

Cornwall is associated with him through Tintagel where he was born ; Carlisle and Cumberland generally recall him ; Brittany claims a share in him. Last, but not least, the Scottish Lowlands also claim him as a hero—as the Arthurian place-names testify ; and there is an old Scottish rhyme quoted by Sir Edward Strachey that runs :—

*Arthur knyght, he rade on nicht  
With gylten spur and candle-licht.*

To return to Mr. Rhys :—

“ If the exact letter of the book’s history be doubted, its spirit is happily secure in our hearts forever. The historical King Arthur will never be defined possibly, but the ideal Arthur lives and reigns securely beyond time and space in that kingdom of old romance of which Camelot is the capital. In Malory’s account he is not immaculate ; he errs and sins and suffers, is defeated and shamed often, and

for that reason appeals more closely to the human heart. And so with all his Knights, except Sir Galahad, whose honour was without reproach or stain. It is this flower of Arthurian chivalry, full of poetic and spiritual symbolism, grown in the garden of romance, which charms us to-day; a flower of incomparable setting. . .

“ Altogether the romance may be trusted to charm us to-day as it charmed its hearers in Caxton’s first edition. Its spirit of adventure—the artistic outcome of an age of animal energy—is a healthy one to move in our too reflective, critical modern order of literature. There is nothing of our nervous sentimentalism in it; throughout it is as fresh and breezy as the first west wind of spring. As a piece of romance-writing it is immensely stirring; it bears suggestively upon the art of fiction and is full of inspiration for the tale-teller in its simple methods and effects. Romantic and realistic circumstance; place and folk interest; adventure and dramatic movement; there is curious lore to be learnt in these things from the book. To conclude, let us read in our Malory, in the spirit of these words of Caxton in the Prologue :

“ ‘For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and



sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renown. And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in, but for to give faith and belief that all is true that is contained therein, ye be at your liberty. ' "

So much for the Introduction to the Legend ; let us now turn to the story itself.

As given to us by Malory it is a romance and more : it is a prose epic. We have the colour and movement and variety of a romance, and we have the single thread—the story of Arthur running through it all connecting the detached tales and forming them into an epic. We have, moreover, the epic idea of Fate, strong, resistless, inevitable, over-ruling the whole course of events, and carrying everything onward to the final catastrophe. To use a very hackneyed, but most suggestive simile, we see the boat that carries Arthur and his fortunes in mid-stream ; we hear the sound of the fall in the distance, and we know what the end must be.

It would be interesting to contrast the modern idea of Fate, as something made by the man himself through his actions, with that of the ancient world where Fate is a power altogether outside the man. With Malory, of course, this power is objective, and the various actions of the

different characters are not causes but instruments.

Tennyson, in his earlier Arthurian poems, does indeed strike the note of pure romance, but later on the story-teller gives place to the moralist and the *Idylls* become allegories. He speaks himself in the Dedication to the Queen, at the end of the *Idylls*, of

*This old imperfect tale,  
New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,  
Rather than that gray King, whose name, a ghost,  
Streams like a cloud, man-shaped from mountain  
peak,  
And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still ; or him  
Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's . . .*

And again, in a conversation with one of his friends, Tennyson says, " By King Arthur I always meant the soul, and by the Round Table the passions and capacities of man."

Compare with this the words that the poet puts into the mouth of Guinevere after Arthur has bid her farewell,

*Ah ! great and gentle lord,  
Who wast, as is the Conscience of a Saint  
Among his warring senses, to thy Knights.*

In Tennyson Arthur is the Stainless King, "Mine own ideal knight," and upon Guinevere falls the whole burden of the Tragedy.

*Handbook* "The *Idylls* are usually regarded  
*Morton* as the History of a King and a  
*Luce* Kingdom that were ruined through the fault of one woman."

That being the idea of the poet, it is no wonder that he makes his characters speak and act accordingly. In the *Idyll of Guinevere*, which by the way is entirely Tennysonian, as in the old Legends there is no leave-taking possible between the Queen and her husband, Arthur tells her,

*"Thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life."*

He speaks of his order of the Round Table, of his dreams for the Regeneration of the world, and of the first successful years:—

*"And all this throve before I wedded thee . . . .  
 Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot,  
 Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;  
 Then others, following these my mightiest knights  
 And drawing foul ensample from fair names,  
 Sinned also, till the loathsome opposite  
 Of all my heart had destined, did obtain . . . .  
 And all thro' thee" . . . .*

Also :—

*“ Well is it that no child is born of thee.  
The children born of thee are sword and fire,  
Red ruin and the breaking up of laws,  
The craft of kindred, and the godless hosts  
Of heathen swarming o’er the Northern Sea ” . . .*

She is the

*Woman whose disloyal life  
Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round . . . .*

And in the Kingdom generally, for we learn  
in another place :—

*For now the heathen of the Northern Sea,  
Lured by the crimes and frailties of the Court,  
Begin to slay the folk and spoil the land . . . .*

It is a heavy indictment ; but in the *Idylls*—  
and it must be admitted in *Malory* also—  
Guinevere, bowed down in shame and sorrow,  
attempts no defence and takes upon herself  
the blame for all the misfortunes that close  
Arthur’s reign.

*Gone, my lord !  
Gone through my sin to slay and to be slain.*

She tells the Nuns of Amesbury,  
*Ye know me then, that wicked one who broke  
 The vast design and purpose of the King . . . .*

She craves permission to live with them,  
*And wear out in alms' deed and in prayer  
 The sombre close of that voluptuous day  
 Which wrought the ruin of my lord the King.*

In Malory, when Lancelot comes to see the Queen, after the last great battle and the death of the King, she exclaims :

“ Through this knight and me all the wars were wrought, and the death of the most noble knights in the world ; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain . . . ”

In Malory, as in Tennyson, the woman takes the larger share of the burden of guilt upon herself. Compare

*Mine was the shame, for I was wife, and thou  
 Unwedded. . . .*

with

“ Therefore, Sir Lancelot, I require thee and beseech thee heartily, for all the love that ever

was between us two, that thou never look me more in the visage ; and furthermore I command thee, on God's behalf, right straightly that thou forsake my company, and that unto thy kingdom shortly thou return again, and keep well thy realm from war and wreck. For as well as I have loved thee, Sir Launcelot, now mine heart will not once serve thee to see thee ; for through me and thee are the flower of kings and knights destroyed, therefore Sir Launcelot, go thou unto thy realm, and there take thee a wife, and live with her in joy and bliss ; and I beseech you heartily pray for me unto our Lord God, that I may amend my misliving."

Lancelot's reply is worthy of him.

" Now, sweet Madam," said Sir Launcelot, " would ye that I should now return again into my country, and there to wed a lady? Nay, madam, wit ye well that I will never while I live ; for I shall never be so false to you of that I promised, but the same destiny that ye have taken you unto I will take me unto, for to please God, and especially to pray for you."

" If thou wilt do so," said the Queen, " hold thy promise ; but I may not believe but that thou wilt return to the world again."

" Ye say well," said he ; " yet wist me never false of my promise, and God defend but that I

should forsake the world like as ye have done ; for in the quest of the Sancgreal I had forsaken the vanities of the world, had not your lord been : and if I had done so at the time with my heart, will and thought, I had passed all the knights that were in the quest of the Sancgreal, except Sir Galahad, my son. And, therefore, my lady, Dame Guenever, since ye have taken you unto perfection, I must needs take me unto perfection of right. For I take record of God in you have I had mine earthly joy ; and if I had found you so disposed now, I had cast me for to have had you in mine own realm and country.

## X.

“ But since I find you thus disposed, I endure you faithfully that I will take me to penance, and pray, while my life lasteth, if I may find any good hermit, either grey or white, that will receive me ; wherefore, Madam, I pray you kiss me once, and never more.”

“ Nay,” said the Queen, “ that shall I never do ; but abstain you from such things.”

And so they departed ; but there was never so hard-hearted a man but he would have wept to see the sorrow they made : for there was a lamentation as though they had been stung with spears, and many times they swooned—”

Her ladies bear the Queen to her chamber, and Sir Lancelot takes his horse and rides all day and all night till he comes to a hermitage and a chapel, and there the "Bishop of Canterbury," at his earnest request, shrives and assoils him, and allows him to "be his brother."

"And he put a habit upon Sir Launcelot; and there he served God, day and night, with prayers and fastings."

The account of Guinevere's death and burial which follows is too fine to be mutilated so I quote it in full; not the least pathetic part is Launcelot's confession of his sin, and his penitence.

Some six years have passed and he is a priest in the little chapel whither he went after his leave-taking with Guinevere.

The chapel is connected with a hermitage where the (sometime) Bishop of Canterbury, Lancelot, Sir Bors and six other Knights live together as monks . . .

"And there was none of these Knights but read in books, and helped for to sing Mass, and ring bells, and did lowly all manner of service."

Here Lancelot has a dream which tells him of the approaching death of Guinevere:—

"And thus upon a night there came a vision



unto Sir Launcelot, and charged him, in remission of all his sins, to haste him toward Amesbury, 'and by that time thou come there thou shall find Queen Guenever dead; and therefore take thy fellows with thee, and also purvey thee a horse-bier, and bring you the corpse of her, and bury it by her lord and husband, the noble King Arthur.' So this vision came thrice unto Sir Launcelot in one night.

## XI.

Then Sir Launcelot rose up ere it was day, and told the hermit thereof. "It is well done," said the hermit; "look that ye disobey not this vision."

Then Sir Launcelot took his seven fellows with him, and on foot they went from Glastonbury, the which is little more than thirty miles: and thither they came within two days, for they were weak and feeble to go.

And when Sir Launcelot was come to Almesbury, within the nunnery, Queen Guinever died but half an hour before; and the ladies told Sir Launcelot that Queen Guenever had told all ere she died "that Sir Launcelot had been a priest near twelve months, and hither he

cometh, as fast as he may, for to fetch my corpse; and beside my lord, King Arthur, he shall bury me."

Wherefore the Queen said, in hearing of them all, " I beseech Almighty God, that I may never have power to see Sir Launcelot with my worldly eyes."

" And this," said all the ladies, " was ever her prayer all those two days, until she was dead."

Then Sir Launcelot saw her visage; but he wept not greatly, but sighed. And so he did all the observance of the service himself, both the dirge at night, and the mass on the morrow; and there was ordained a horse-bier: and so with a hundred torches ever burning about the corpse of the Queen. And ever Sir Launcelot with his seven fellows went about the bier, singing and reading many a holy and devout orison, and frankincense upon the corpse incensed. Thus Sir Launcelot and his seven fellows went on foot from Almesbury until they came to Glastonbury; and when they were come to the chapel and the hermitage, there she had a dirge with great devotion; and on the morrow the hermit, that was sometime Bishop of Canterbury, sung the mass of requiem with great devotion; and Sir Launcelot was the first that offered, and then offered all

his seven fellows : and then she was wrapped in seared cloths of reins, from the top to the toe, in thirty fold, and then she was put in a web of lead, and after in a coffin of marble. And when she was put into the earth, Sir Launcelot swooned, and lay long upon the ground, while the hermit came and awaked him and said, " Ye are to blame, for ye displease God with such manner of sorrow-making." " Truly," said Sir Launcelot, " I trust I do not displease God, for he knoweth well mine intent, for my sorrow was not nor is not for any rejoicing of sin ; but my sorrow may never have an end. For when I remember and call to mind her beauty, her bounty, and her nobleness, that was as well with her King, my lord Arthur, as with her ; and also when I saw the corpse of that noble King, and noble Queen, so lie together in that cold grave, made of earth, that sometime were so highly set in most honourable places, truly mine heart would not serve me to sustain my wretched and careful body also. And when I remember me how through my default, and through my presumption and pride, that they were both laid full low, the which were peerless that ever were living of Christian people. Wit ye well," said Sir Launcelot, " this remembered of their kindness, and of mine unkindness, sunk

and impressed so in my heart, that all my natural strength failed me, so that I might not sustain myself."

The passages just quoted appear to be overwhelming arguments in favour of the theory that the downfall of Arthur's kingdom was the direct consequence of the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere. But, before we give our unqualified assent to that theory, let us examine the story from what we may call the "fateful" point of view. Here also the ruin of the great order founded by Arthur comes about as the consequence of, and punishment for, a sin; but it is not the sin of Guinevere. The final catastrophe is due to many causes, but the seed of evil is sown, early in the history, by Arthur himself. Let us turn to the beginning of our Malory, to the *Book of Merlin*.

There we have the mysterious birth of Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, King of Britain, and Igraine, widow of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. The infant prince is delivered to Merlin, who confides him to the care of Sir Ector (the Sir Anton of the first *Idyll*). The boy grows up believing himself to be Sir Ector's son, nor does he learn the secret of his birth until he comes to man's estate. Uther dies without leaving an acknowledged heir, and the kingdom is dis-

tracted and rent by the quarrels of the rival chieftains who aspire to the crown of Britain. At last Merlin calls a great convocation of all the estates of the realm. It meets in London on Christmas Eve, and public prayer is offered that the rightful heir may be made known by a miracle.

Then we have the first of those sword-portents so dear to the old Chroniclers :—

“ And when Matins and the first Mass was done, there was seen in the church-yard, against the High Altar, a great stone, four square, like to a marble stone, and in the midst thereof was an anvil of steel, a foot of height, and therein stuck a fairsword, naked by the point, and letters of gold were written about the sword that said thus :—“ Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of England—”

Arthur draws the sword, and achieves his first adventure ; and after many delays is at last accepted by the people and crowned King at the Feast of Pentecost.

“ And Arthur took the sword between both his hands, and offered it up to the Altar, where the Archbishop was, and was made knight of the best man that was there. And so anon

was the Coronation made, and there was he sworn to the lords and commons for to be a true King, to stand with true justice from thenceforth all the days of his life—”

Flouted at first by the other British Kinglets as a “beardless boy,” Arthur fights his way up to the proud position of King of England (it is England in the legend.) He holds his Court at Caerleon, to which come Ambassadors from all the British princes. “And hither came to him Marganse, Lot’s wife of Orkney, in manner of a messenger. But she was sent thither to espy the Court of King Arthur, and she was a passing fair woman.” So great, indeed, was her beauty that the King fell in love with her and sinned for her sake. Then he is troubled with dreams, and Merlin interprets them, revealing to Arthur the dreadful fact that Marganse is the daughter of Gorlois and Igraine, and therefore his half-sister. The birth of Mordred is foretold—“a child that shall destroy you and all the Knights of your realm.” Merlin further tells the King that this child shall be born on May Day, whereupon Arthur commands that all the gentle children born on May Day should be sent to him on “pain of death”—“And so there were found many lords’ sons, and all were sent to the King,

and so was Mordred sent by King Lot's wife, and all were put in a ship to the sea."

The ship is wrecked, and all the children perish except one, Mordred,—“who was cast up and found by a good man who nourished him till he was fourteen years old and brought him to the Court.”

His history must have then been revealed, for all through the *Morte d'Arthur* he is known as Gawain's brother, and Arthur's son.

This is the beginning of sorrows. The next link in the chain of events is the Marriage of Arthur to Guinevere, daughter of Leodegraunce, King of Cameliard. Arthur helps Leodegraunce against his enemies, and “there had Arthur first sight of Guinevere, and ever after he loved her.” Merlin warns him privily that “Guinevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Lancelot should love her, and she him again.” Naturally enough the King disregards the warning, for was not Guinevere the “gentlest and fairest damsel living”?

Merlin is sent to ask her hand and she is brought with great rejoicing to Camelot, and there wedded to Arthur, in the Church of St. Steven's with great solemnity. Her dowry

is the famous Round Table, made by Merlin for Uther Pendragon, and presented by Uther to Leodegraunce. There were 150 *sieges* at the table, and Leodegraunce sends his son-in-law 100 Knights, the first members of the Order that was afterwards to be so famous.

In Malory's account of the Marriage we hear nothing of Lancelot being sent as "Ambassador to lead Guinevere to the King." That fancy of Tennyson's is one, however, with which we instinctively sympathise, though such was the fascination of Lancelot that it hardly requires the theory that Guinevere first seeing him, took him for the King, and that the feeling of mutual admiration deepened into something stronger during the month's journey that lay (according to Tennyson) between her old home and Camelot. I say it hardly requires that theory to account for the Queen's infatuation, when we remember how everyone from the King and Sir Galahad down to Morgan le Fay loved Sir Lancelot.

In Malory, Lancelot is still a boy at the time of Arthur's marriage (See the *Book of Morgan le Fay*) for, long after that event Merlin and Nimue see him as a youth in his own home at Benwick in France. He follows Arthur in his Roman Campaign, performs prodigies of valour, and wins great worship :



*Lancelot*      “ So that in all tournaments, and  
*du*            deeds of arms, both for life and death,  
*Lake.*       he passed all Knights. Sir Launcelot  
 increased so marvellously in worship and honour,  
 wherefore he is the first Knight that the French  
 book maketh mention of, after that King Arthur  
 came from Rome, wherefore Queen Guinevere  
 had him in great favour above all other Knights,  
 and certainly he loved the Queen again above all  
 other ladies and damsels all the days of his life,  
 and for her he did many great deeds of arms and  
 saved her from the fire through his noble  
 chivalry.”

For a long time, however, the relation between them seems to have been that of devout lover and gracious lady—a relation peculiar to the age of chivalry, and allowed by all.

Compare in this connection Lancelot's speech to the Queen in *Lancelot and Elaine* :—

“ *But now my loyal worship is allowed  
 Of all men : Many a bard without offence  
 Has linked our names together in his lay,  
 Lancelot, the flower of bravery, Guinevere,  
 The pearl of beauty : and our Knights at feast  
 Have pledged us in this union, while the King  
 Would listen smiling—*”

His love for the Queen prevented Lancelot from fully achieving the Adventure of the Holy Grail, yet it must not be forgotten that he did partially achieve it. Let us remember also that for a whole month during his Quest he lived on the ship which bore the dead body of Sir Percival's sister, and—"If ye would ask me how he lived, he that fed the people of Israel with manna in the desert, likewise fed him. For every day when he had said his prayers he was sustained of the Holy Ghost."

Chapters XIII, XIV and XV of the *Book of the Holy Grail*, which tell what Lancelot saw of the great Mystery, are, I think, even more suggestive and touching than those which relate the fuller visions of Sir Galahad, Sir Percival and Sir Bors, though to them is granted the sight of Our Lord Himself.

Strangely enough it is after Lancelot's return from the Quest that his love for the Queen waxes hotter and hotter, "till many spake of it in the Court and most especially Sir Agravaine." Then Lancelot "to eschew slander" withdraws himself from the Queen, whereupon she is very angry, accuses him of lukewarmness in his devotion, and finally banishes him from her presence. But it is only for a short time. In this *Book of Sir Mador*, and the following one

of *The Queen's Maying* we see how he comes back to Guinevere in her hour of need, and twice saves her from the fire—"And then the King and Queen made much of Sir Lancelot, and more he was cherished than ever he was before."

That *Book of the Queen's Maying* is a very strange one, and it is rather difficult to follow Malory; yet if Lancelot and Guinevere had been as guilty as they appear to be, would Lancelot have conquered in his fights? For we must remember that the Appeal to Arms which was then made, was not merely an appeal to strength and skill, but a prayer that the great Judge of all would defend the right. In both cases victory lay with Lancelot; the Queen was saved from an awful death, and her champion publicly thanked by the King.

In that same book is the intensely interesting story of the *Healing of Sir Urre*, the Hungarian Knight, whose wounds "might never be made whole till they were touched by the best Knight of the World." King Arthur first, and all the Knights of the Round Table in their turn, touch the wounded Knight, but without success. At last, at the King's express command, and much against his own will, Lancelot touches the sick man, and he is made whole.

I cannot resist quoting the passage :—"Then

Sir Launcelot knelt down by the wounded Knight, saying to him thus, 'My Lord, King Arthur, I must needs do your commandment, which is full sore against my heart.'

"And then he held up his hand, and looked into the East, saying secretly to himself, 'Thou blessed Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I beseech thee of thy mercy that my simple worship and honesty be saved, and thou, blessed Trinity, thou mayest give power to heal this sick Knight by the great virtue and grace of thee, but, good Lord, never of myself.'

"And then Sir Launcelot prayed Sir Urre for to let him see his head. And then devoutly kneeling he ransacked the three wounds, that they bled a little; and forthwith the three wounds fair healed, and seemed as though they had been whole seven years before. And in likewise he searched his body of three other wounds, and they healed in likewise. And then the last of all he searched, the which was in his hand, and anon it healed fair.

"Then King Arthur and all the other Kings and Knights kneeled down, and gave thanks and praise to God and to his blessed Mother, and ever Sir Launcelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten."

Sir Lancelot's sin very nearly killed his own

soul, but the loss of the Kingdom was brought about by other causes. The last sentence of this same book tells us where we should look for the chief one—"And here I go unto the death of King Arthur, and that caused by Sir Agravaine." And again in the following book of *Sir Lancelot and the King* :—

"So in this season as the month of the May it happened there befel a great misfortune, the which stinted not till the flower of chivalry of all the world was destroyed and slain : and all was long of two unhappy Knights—Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred."

King Arthur himself takes this view :—

"Ah, Agravaine, Agravaine !" said the King, "Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thine evil will that thou and thy brother, Sir Mordred, had unto Sir Lancelot, has caused all this sorrow !"

Mordred and Agravaine are, in fact, actuated by much the same motives as were the old Persian and Median nobles who plotted against Daniel in the days of Darius. Unfortunately it was easier for the Knights to discover a cause of offence. The story is told in the *Book of Lancelot and the King* ; how the plotters speak of their suspicions to the King, and propose the setting of a snare for Lancelot and Guinevere ; how the King — after first struggling against

the proposal—weakly consents ; how the plot succeeds and Lancelot is trapped in the Queen's chamber ; how he slays the twelve Knights who are lying in wait for him, only one—Sir Mordred—escaping to tell the tale to Arthur.

Here again is the finger of Fate, for twice is Mordred saved that he may fulfil his destiny. As a matter of fact this whole Book ought to be quoted, but as that is manifestly impossible we must content ourselves with touching on the chief points :—The parting of Lancelot and the Queen ; the fierce wrath of Arthur and his decree that the Queen shall be burnt, and this in spite of Sir Gawain's pleading for a short delay on the ground that " Tho' it were so that Sir Lancelot was found in the Queen's chamber, yet it might be that he came thither for none evil ; " the preparation to carry out the sentence at Carlisle in the presence of a large assembly of Knights, commanded thither by the King, but who go unarmed as a mute protest against Arthur's decree, and a proof that they behold the execution against their wills ; the rescue of the Queen by Sir Lancelot at the stake itself, and his care of her in Joyous Gard, whither he takes her, and where he keeps her " as a noble Knight should do."

Now we come to the beginning of the war

between Lancelot and Arthur. Lancelot inadvertently slays Gaheris and Gareth (Gawain's brothers) in the tumult at the rescue, and Sir Gawain, vowing vengeance, spurs on the King to fight against Sir Lancelot. They besiege Joyous Gard for fifteen weeks and Lancelot merely defends himself, for he will not lift his hand against the King. His appeal to Arthur to take back Guinevere, and his passionate defence of the Queen's honour are most touching.

"My most noble King," said Sir Lancelot, "ye may say what ye will ; for wit you well that with yourself I will not strive . . . and as for my lady, Queen Guenever (except your person of your highness, and my lord Sir Gawaine) there is no Knight under heaven that dare make it good upon me that ever I was a traitor to your person . . . I shall make answer, and prove it upon any Knight that beareth life (except your person and Sir Gawaine) that my lady, Queen Guenever, is a true lady unto your person, and that will I make good with my hands ; howbeit it hath liked her good grace to have me in charity, and to cherish me more than any other knight ; and unto my person I have deserved her love again ; for oftentimes, my lord, ye have consented that she should be burnt and destroyed in your heat, and then

it fortunèd me to do battle for her, and on that I departed from her adversaries, they confessed their untruths, and she worshipfully excused. . . . And therefore, my good and gracious lord," said Sir Lancelot, "take your Queen unto your good grace, for she is both fair, true, and good."

At last, in answer to the entreaties of his own Knights (for Arthur will not listen to him), Lancelot sallies out against his enemies. The Royal party get rather the worse of the encounter—Lancelot actually saving the King's life on one occasion ; and as Gawain is sorely wounded, the strife ceases for a time. Then, the matter reaching the Pope's ears, he sends a Bull to the King commanding him, "upon pain of interdicting of all England, that he take his Queen, Dame Guinevere, to him again, and accord with Sir Lancelot."

The Pope's command is half obeyed. The King receives Guinevere, but Sir Gawain will not allow him to make peace with Sir Lancelot, who is merely granted a safe conduct to bring the Queen to the King. The description of this scene, in Chapter XVII, of which Lancelot is the hero, is well worth reading ; indeed Lancelot all through this book compels our admiration for his chivalrous, selfless, patience. He leaves



the Queen with King Arthur at Carlisle, and returns to Joyous Gard, and eventually he and his Knights go over to his kingdom of Benwick in France. Thither he is followed by Arthur, who appears to be completely under the influence of the vindictive Gawain, with a great army, while Mordred is left behind as Governor of England and Guardian of the Queen.

Arthur and his host burn, slay, and ravage in Lancelot's country, and refusing the latter's entreaties for peace, prosecute the war with vigour. At last they besiege Benwick itself (Lancelot's capital), where the struggle resolves itself into a series of single combats between Lancelot and Gawain. Three times do they fight and each time Gawain is put to the worse. The last battle lays him low for a month, and just before he is fully healed "tidings come to the King from England which make him and all his host to remove."

The tidings are startling enough. The traitor Mordred, giving out that Arthur has fallen in the war with Lancelot, not only proclaims himself King and is solemnly crowned at Canterbury, but actually seizes Guinevere and announces that he will wed her. Guinevere, absolutely in the traitor's power, pretends to accede to his infamous proposal, and is permitted to go to

London “for to buy all manner of things that belonged to the wedding.” Once safely in the City, however, she provisions and garrisons it and holds it valiantly against Mordred, who comes against her with all his host, and besieges her straitly. At this point Arthur returns, and there are fought three pitched battles between the King and his rebellious son. The first is at Dover where Gawain receives his death wound ; (the letter he writes to Lancelot when he feels that his end is near is one of the most pathetic passages in the whole book). The second at Barendown, and the third—the last great fight—takes place on a “down beside Salisbury, not far from the sea-side.”

In the two first battles the advantage lies with the King. Then he has a dream : he sees the spirit of Gawain who, in answer to the prayers of the ladies for whom he had fought during his lifetime, is allowed to come back and warn the King, if haply he may escape his doom. Gawain beseeches him not to fight on the morrow, “for an ye do, ye shall be slain,” but urges him to treat with Mordred for a month’s armistice, “for within a month shall come Sir Lancelot and all his noble Knights, and shall rescue you worshipfully, and slay Sir Mordred.”

The King thereupon, after consulting with his officers, sends messengers to Sir Mordred asking for thirty days' cessation of hostilities. After a long time Mordred consents, not merely to an armistice, but apparently to a lasting peace, on condition that he at once becomes lord of Cornwall and Kent, and is acknowledged as Arthur's successor on the throne.

But this treaty has to be ratified by the principals in person, so the King and Sir Mordred agree to meet between the two hosts, attended only by fourteen Knights. Both, however, are afraid of treachery, and to both armies the command is given that if a sword is drawn they should at once "come on fiercely."

Everything is peacefully arranged, and they drink together in token of amity, when Fate again intervenes. A Knight is stung in the foot by an adder and "thinking no harm" draws his sword to slay the snake. It is the signal for which both sides were told to watch, and the battle begins again in grim earnest. One hundred thousand men are slain, and of all the great host none are left alive save the King and Sir Bedivere on the one side, and Sir Mordred on the other. The account of this last weird battle in the West, in the *Passing of Arthur*, makes one shiver, and one is conscious of what is

almost a sensation of relief when the end comes with the last hand to hand struggle between Arthur and Mordred. The King slays the traitor, but is himself wounded to the death.

Nothing can be finer than Tennyson's account of those last hours, and it agrees in all essentials with that of Malory. Excalibur, no longer required by its lord, is received again into the bosom of the Mere, and the dying King is borne away in the barge by the three Queens and Nimue, the Lady of the Lake.

Says Malory :—

“ More of the death of Arthur could I never find, but that ladies brought him unto the burials, and such an one was buried here (that is at Glastonbury) but yet the hermit who buried him knew not of a certain that it was verily the body of Arthur. . . . Some men yet say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead ; but had come by the will of our Lord Jesu Christ into another place ; and men say that he will come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross. I will not say that it shall be so ; but rather I will say that here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse :—

*Hic jacet Arthurus rex quondam rexque futurus.*

“ And when Queen Guenever heard that King Arthur was slain and all his noble Knights, she went to Almesbury, and there let make herself a nun.”

Here, as we have seen already, Lancelot finds her, after he has hastened over from France to the aid of the King. But it is too late—too late. The accounts of the final parting of Lancelot and Guinevere, and of her death and burial have been quoted in full, so there is no need to touch on them now. Lancelot does not long survive the woman he worshipped. He dies, and in the same bier that carried the corpse of Guinevere to Glastonbury, his body is borne to his Castle of Joyous Gard, and there buried amid universal lamentation. Here, on the very day of his burial, he is found at last by his brother, Sir Ector de Maris, who has sought him for seven long years. Ector's lament for Sir Lancelot is the gem of the *Morte d'Arthur*.

“ Ah ! Sir Launcelot,” said he, “ thou wert head of all Christian Knights. And now, I dare say,” said Sir Ector, “ that Sir Launcelot, there thou liest, thou were never matched of none earthly knight's hands ; and thou wert the courtliest knight that ever bare shield : and thou wert the truest friend to thy lover that

ever bestrode horse : and thou wert the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman : and thou wert the kindest man that ever struck with sword : and thou wert the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights : and thou wert the meekest man and the gentlest that ever sat in hall among ladies : and thou wert the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in rest."

Here is practically the end of the *Book of King Arthur and his noble Knights of the Round Table*.

According to Malory the immediate cause of the downfall of Arthur's kingdom is the treachery of Mordred who, like Absalom, drew away the hearts of the people from their allegiance to the King, "so that the common voice among them was that with King Arthur was none other life but war and strife, and with Sir Mordred was great joy and bliss . . . and the most part of all England held with Sir Mordred, the people were so new-fangled."

Between Arthur's sin that sowed the seed of evil, and the treason of Mordred that gave the final blow to the Order of the Round Table is a long chain of intermediate causes ; and one of the chief links in the chain—paradoxical though it may appear—is the Quest of the Holy

Grail. Professor Alfred Nutt, one of the greatest Arthurian critics, insists that the Quest exercised no influence whatever on Arthur and his fortune, and that the tale is practically an incident thrust into the main story with which it has no real connection. Such is not the view of Tennyson, who, in this respect, follows Malory, as is clearly seen when we compare his account of the coming of the Holy Grail into the Hall of the Knights with that of Malory in the *Book of Sir Galahad*.

The prophetic spirit descends on Arthur, and with tears in his eyes he reproaches Sir Gawain, (the first to swear to follow the Quest), with having broken up his goodly fellowship of Knights.

“Alas,” said King Arthur unto Sir Gawaine, “ye have nigh slain me with the vow and promise that ye have made, for through you ye have bereft me of the fairest fellowship, and the truest of knighthood, that ever were seen together in any realm of the world, for when they shall depart from hence I am sure that all shall never meet more in this world, for there shall many die in the quest, and so it forethinketh me a little, for I have loved them as well as my life; wherefore it shall grieve me right sore the separation of this fellowship, for

I have an old custom to have them in my fellowship."

And therewith the tears fell into his eyes, and he said, " Sir Gawaine, Sir Gawaine, ye have set me in great sorrow, for I have great doubt that my true fellowship shall never meet more here again." And in spite of Sir Lancelot's comforting words, it is amid the sighs and tears of the people of Camelot that the Knights ride away to the Quest. Thus Malory.

In the *Idyll of the Holy Grail* the King says to Sir Percivale :

*Thy holy nun and thou have seen a sign,  
A sign to maim this Order which I made . .  
Go, since your vows are sacred, being made :  
Yet - for ye know the cries of all my realm  
Pass thro' this hall—how often, O my Knights,  
Your places being vacant at my side,  
This chance of noble deeds will come and go  
Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires  
Lost in the quagmire ! Many of you, yea most  
Return no more . . . . "*

And again, towards the end of the *Idyll*, King Arthur says :—

*And spake I not too truly, O my Knights ?  
Was I too dark a prophet when I said*



*To those who went upon the Holy Quest,  
That most of them would follow wandering fires,  
Lost in the quagmire ?—lost to me and gone,  
And left me gazing at a barren board,  
And a lean Order—scarce returned a tithe.*

The Quest of the Holy Grail is a wonderful conception, due most probably to Walter Map. The word "Grail" in the Romance language means a dish or drinking vessel, and is probably derived from the Low Latin "*gradalis*," or "*grasalis*," and this from the Greek "*crater*." The old writers describe it sometimes as a shallow vessel for holding food, and sometimes as a cup.

In Tennyson it is,

*The cup, the cup itself from which our Lord  
Drank at the last sad supper with His own.*

In Malory it is described by Christ Himself, when He appears to the Knights at Corbin, as "The Holy dish wherein I ate the lamb on Shrove Thursday."

After the Last Supper, the holy vessel—whether dish or cup—was taken by Joseph of Arimathea, who received in it the Blood from the wounds of our Lord. It was afterwards brought

to England by Joseph, and kept in a tower built expressly for it at Corbiency.

"At the Cathedral of Genoa," says Sir Edward Strachey in his Introduction to *King Arthur*, "one of the chief treasures is the Holy Grail. It is an hexagonal dish about 17 inches across, and it was long supposed to be a single emerald, which stone it resembles in colour and brilliancy."

The Quest of the Holy Grail is generally taken to mean the striving of the heart of man after the Ideal. One critic describes it as the most poetical representation of the doctrine of Transubstantiation; and it is an almost literal presentment of the Beatitude pronounced on the pure in heart.

It is, however, very strange that the striving after the Ideal by the individual makes (in the legend, at least), not for the good but rather for the harm of the community.

Even Tennyson shows this; though, as we have already pointed out, in his version of the tale the ruin of the King and of the kingdom is brought about chiefly by the lawless love of Lancelot and Guinevere. But, as Mr. Rhys says in his Introduction, "The moral exalting of the King at the expense of the Queen,  
*p. xviii.* of the man at the expense of the woman,

in Tennyson's reading of Arthurian history is not according to Malory, or to the original idea in romance, as it is certainly not a worthy or heroic turn to the old tale."

Still, whatever we may think of the fairness of the proceeding, it is to this "moral exalting of Arthur" that we owe that splendid conception of the blameless King—"the flower of Kings," as Joseph of Exeter calls him.

Tennyson's Arthur is the ideal Knight, the founder of an ideal Order of Chivalry, which is bound by ideal laws. In the *Idyll of Guinevere* we read the King's own description of his Order and the rules which governed its members. He speaks of,

*That fair Order of my Table Round,  
A glorious company, the flower of men.*

He tells how,

*I made them lay their hands in mine and swear  
To reverence the King, as if he were  
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King  
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,  
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,  
To speak no slander, nor to listen to it,  
To honour his own word as if his God's,  
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,*

*To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
Until they won her.*

With these words of the nineteenth century poet, compare those of the fifteenth century romancist.

“ Then King Arthur established all  
*The Book of the Three Quests.* his Knights, and gave them lands,  
that were not rich of land, and  
charged them never to do outrage nor  
murder, and always to flee treason ; also by  
no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto  
him that asked mercy, upon pain of forfeiture  
of their worship and lordship of King Arthur  
for evermore ; and always to do ladies, damsels  
and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death ;  
also that no man take no battles in a wrong  
quarrel for no law, nor for worldly goods. Unto  
this were all the Knights sworn of the Round  
Table, both old and young ; and every year  
they were sworn at the high feast of Pentecost.”

The idea, of course, is practically the same in both cases, but it is interesting to see the difference in the words that clothe the idea. Tennyson's conception is more ideal, more spiritual. Indeed the Order of the Round Table, as it

existed in the mind of his Arthur, is no unworthy shadow of that celestial company which Kingsley has so finely called the "Chivalry of Heaven"—the company pictured by St. John in the *Book of the Revelation*, where he says :—

"And I saw Heaven opened, and behold a white horse ; and he that sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war . . . . And the armies which were in Heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean."

Both Tennyson and Malory are steeped in the spirit of chivalrous knighthood, or knightly chivalry. The phrase, let us remember, is not redundant ; for as F. D. Maurice says,<sup>1</sup> "We must use both words adequately to express the Idea." The true knight, he goes on to explain, was not only the "*chevalier*" or "*Ritter*" ; that is, the Rider of the Warhorse, the soldier ; he was also the "*Knecht*," the Servant : so that the ideal knight was none other than the ideal christian—the soldier and servant of Christ.

I think we see that idea running all through Malory, though his Knights and his King often

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Sir Edward Strachey.

fall very far short of the ideal standard. But as Caxton tells us in his *Prologue* (already quoted), we need only “take the good and honest acts in our remembrance and follow the same.”

“In the Book are many things :—noble chivalry courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and sin. Do after the good, and leave the evil, and it shall bring you unto good fame and renown.”

# EAST AND WEST

TAGORE AND STEVENSON





## EAST AND WEST: TAGORE AND STEVENSON.

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain  
shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment  
seat ;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor  
Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come  
from the ends of the earth !*

SO sings Kipling in his famous ballad, and what is true of the warrior is also true of the poet. There are certain common properties which belong to the poet all the world over, irrespective of time, race, religion or country. It is the manner in which these common properties are handled that makes the difference between poet and poet, and it is of these same differences and resemblances that I propose to treat in the following pages.

The title at the head of my paper is an ambitious and, I fear, a misleading one, as my " East " is restricted to one modern Eastern poet, Sir Rabindranath Tagore ; nor does my " West " go very far afield.

The poet with whom Tagore challenges comparison, both as regards likeness and difference, is Stevenson. I have not wandered far from the "Gitanjali," and I have not even touched on Tagore's later poem, "The King of the Dark Chamber," which seems to be an Eastern version of the old legend of Cupid and Psyche ; but, in the "Gitanjali" alone there is more than one poem where the thought—and even the phrasing—is extraordinarily like Stevenson.

Take, for instance, the passage from "Our Lady of the Snows" where Stevenson apostrophises the monks in the Monastery and tells them they would do far better to be "up and doing"—doing something active in a world which is meant for action.

*And ye, O brethren, what if God,  
When from Heaven's top He spies abroad,  
And sees on this tormented stage  
The noble war of mankind rage :  
What if His vivifying eye  
O monks, should pass your corner by ?  
For still the Lord is Lord of might ;  
In deeds, in deeds, He takes delight ;  
The plough, the spear, the laden barks,  
The field, the founded city marks ;*

*He marks the smiler of the streets,  
The singer upon garden seats ;  
He sees the climber in the rocks :  
To him, the shepherd folds his flocks.  
For those He loves that underprop  
With daily virtues Heaven's top,  
And bear the falling sky with ease,  
Unfrowning caryatides.  
Those He approves that ply the trade,  
That rock the child, that wed the maid,  
That with weak virtues, weaker hands,  
Sow gladness on the peopled lands,  
And still with laughter, song and shout,  
Spin the great wheel of earth about.*

*But ye ?—O ye who linger still  
Here in your fortress on the hill,  
With placid face, with tranquil breath,  
The unsought volunteers of death,  
Our cheerful General on high  
With careless looks may pass you by.*

And compare with this the eleventh song in  
the “ Gitanjali ”—

*Leave this chanting and singing and telling of  
beads !  
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark  
corner of a temple with doors all shut ?*

*Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee !  
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard  
ground and where the path-maker is breaking  
stones. He is with them in sun and in  
shower, and his garment is covered with dust.  
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him  
come down on the dusty soil !*

Listen again to this prayer from the " Gitanjali " and say whether it has not the very ring of the " Prayers from Vailima "

*This is my prayer to thee, my Lord,  
Strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.  
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and  
sorrows.  
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in  
service.  
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or  
bend my knees before insolent might.  
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above  
daily trifles,  
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to  
thy will with love.*

We may return later to the religious poems of Tagore ; for the different points of view of East and West, and the attitude of each to this world and the next are very interesting. Just now,

however, let us consider Tagore's poems on childhood. They are an Eastern "Child's Garden of Verses."

Here is "Vocation" from "The Crescent Moon."

*"When the gong sounds ten in the morning and  
I walk to school by our lane,  
Every day I meet the hawker crying, ' Bangles !  
crystal bangles ! '*

*There is nothing to hurry him on, there is no road  
he must take, no place he must go to, no time  
when he must come home.*

*I wish I were a hawker, spending my day in the  
road, crying, ' Bangles, crystal bangles ! '*

*When at four in the afternoon I come back from  
school,*

*I can see through the gates of that house the gardener  
digging in the ground.*

*He does what he likes with his spade, he soils his  
clothes with dust, nobody takes him to task  
if he gets baked in the sun, or gets wet.*

*I wish I were a gardener digging away at the garden  
with nobody to stop me from digging.*

*Just as it gets dark in the evening and my mother  
sends me to bed,*

*I can see through my open window the watchman  
walking up and down.*

*The lane is dark and lonely, and the street-lamp  
stands like a giant with one red eye in its  
head.*

*The watchman swings his lantern and walks with  
his shadow at his side, and never once goes  
to bed in his life.*

*I wish I were a watchman walking the streets all  
night, chasing the shadows with my lantern."*

With these verses compare Stevenson's poems  
"The Gardener" and "The Lamplighter."

It must be admitted that Stevenson has no  
desire to dig, nor does he want to be a gardener.  
On the contrary he calls his gardener "silly"  
because—

*He digs the flowers and cuts the hay  
And never seems to want to play.*

He tells him—

*Well now, and while the summer stays,  
To profit by these garden days,  
O how much wiser you would be  
To play at Indian wars with me !*

But the Lamplighter lays his spell on little  
Scot and little Hindu alike.

*My tea is nearly ready and the sun has left the sky ;  
 It's time to take the window to see Leerie going by ;  
 For every night at tea time and before you take  
     your seat,  
 With lantern and with ladder he comes posting up  
     the street.*

. . . . .

*Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,  
 And my papa's a banker and as rich as he can be ;  
 But I, when I am stronger and choose what I'm  
     to do,  
 O Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps  
     with you ! ”*

All the world over children make boats and sail them down the stream. The Western child asks, “ Where go the boats ? ” and tells you—

*Dark brown is the river,  
     Golden is the sand.  
 It flows along for ever  
     With trees on either hand.*

*Green leaves a-floating,  
     Castles of the foam,  
 Boats of mine a-boating—  
     Where will all come home ?*

*On goes the river  
And out past the mills,  
Away down the valley,  
Away down the hills.*

*Away down the river,  
A hundred miles or more,  
Other little children  
Shall bring my boats ashore.*

Charming verses, and objective. The Eastern child is even more imaginative—and subjective. His boats are “Paper Boats,” and he says—

*Day by day I float my paper boats one by one down  
the running stream.*

*In big black letters I write my name on them and  
the name of the village where I live.*

*I hope that someone in some strange land will find  
them and know who I am.*

*I load my little boats with shiuli flowers from our  
garden, and hope that these blooms of the  
dawn will be carried safely to land in the night.*

*I launch my paper boats and look up into the sky  
and see the little clouds setting their white  
bulging sails.*

*I know not what playmate of mine in the sky sends  
them down the air to race with my boats.*



*When night comes I bury my face in my arms and  
dream that my paper boats float on and on  
under the midnight stars.*

*The fairies of sleep are sailing in them, and the  
lading is their baskets full of dreams.*

Also akin to Stevenson both in spirit and in language is the child who would go to seek his fortune in the boat of the boatman Madhu and sail "the seven seas and the thirteen rivers of Fairyland," for did not Stevenson and his companions ride over the mountains and by

*The Silver River, the Sounding Sea,  
And the robber woods of Tartary.*

But, after all, Tagore is chiefly and principally a mystic. For the mystic, too, there is neither East nor West, and yet again there is the difference so strongly marked between the thinker who believes that his soul has begun its journey to eternity in the tabernacle which it inhabits in this world, and him to whom this body is merely one of many garments, worn by the soul through countless ages—a garment soon to be cast off and replaced by another which will be discarded in its turn.

The last twelve or thirteen poems in "Gitanjali" deal with Death. One of them which

begins, "*At this time of my parting, wish me good luck my friends!*" carries the mind to "Crossing the Bar." The journey is by land, not by sea, but

*The evening star will come out when my voyage is done and the plaintive notes of the twilight melodies be struck up from the King's Gateway."*

In the hundreth poem, however, we come upon the spirit of the East. It begins,

*I dive down into the depth of the ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless.*

And it ends,

*Into the audience hall by the fathomless abyss where swells up the music of toneless strings I shall take this harp of my life.*

*I shall tune it to the notes of for ever, and, when it has sobbed out its last utterance, lay down my silent harp at the feet of the silent.*

All through these poems we hear the cry of the human soul for its Divine Lover.

Of human love, save that of the Mother for her child, Tagore speaks little, but of that yearning for union with the Divine he cannot say or sing enough.

One of the most beautiful and suggestive poems in the whole book is that which tells how the King asked an alms of the Beggar.

*I had gone a-begging from door to door in the village path, when thy golden chariot appeared in the distance like a gorgeous dream and I wondered who was this King of all kings !*

*My hopes rose high and methought my evil days were at an end, and I stood waiting for alms to be given unasked and for wealth scattered on all sides in the dust.*

*The chariot stopped where I stood. Thy glance fell on me and thou camest down with a smile. I felt that the luck of my life had come at last. Then of a sudden thou didst hold out thy right hand and say, " What hast thou to give me ? "*

*Ah, what kingly jest was it to open thy palm to a beggar to beg ! I was confused and stood undecided, and then from my wallet I slowly took out the least little grain of corn and gave it to thee.*

*But how great my surprise when at the day's end I emptied my bag on the floor to find a least little grain of gold among the poor heap. I bitterly wept and wished that I had had the heart to give thee my all.*

This is a peculiarly Eastern presentment of a truth recognised by both Eastern and Western mystics alike. Stevenson, I venture to think, would have written that poem differently. One can see his beggar emptying his wallet into the King's hand. He would have given with a quip and a jest—and that night would have wondered how he came to be so rich !

Stevenson is the poet of the sun and the wind and the blue sky, and Stevenson and Tagore, as we have seen, have much in common ; but the poets with whom Tagore has even greater affinity are those of the modern Irish School—Yeats and A. E.

Yeats has written an illuminating Preface to " Gitanjali " which reveals the sympathy between the two men, both as men and as poets. And if we read the poems of Yeats and A. E. this sympathy becomes even more apparent.

Their songs are of the twilight and the stars, the dusk, the days of long ago, rather than of high-noon and sunshine. It is the half-lights and the half-tones that they sing, and of which Tagore would tell. In short " the golden apples of the sun "—brave and bright and beautiful though they be—have not for either Irishman or

Hindu the charm and attractiveness of "the silver apples of the moon."

This, perhaps, is one reason why Tagore does not recall to us the greater poets of our country who were so very "English" in their points of view; but rather those in the second rank, who found—and find—their inspiration in springs of thought which are not confined to one civilisation.

The great poets were themselves "wells of English undefiled"; the secondary poets may, perhaps, have drunk at sources which their greater brethren would have passed by, but where they have met other travellers.

In conclusion, we must remember that one reason why Eastern poetry strikes us sometimes as strange, is that we miss certain allusions. The Bible, with all its wealth of incident and character, is never mentioned; nor have we any dealings with Mount Olympus. Still, for all that, there are themes that thrill and words that haunt us—one wishes one could have heard and understood these poems in the original Bengali—and where there is an echo of a Western thought the Eastern singer loses none of his power, but even gains an added charm by clothing that thought in a garment woven by the East.





